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Monitoring of diet, physical activity and overweight in the Nordic countries

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Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link back to DTU Orbit](#)

Citation (APA):

Fagt, S., Thorgeirsdóttir, H., Barbieri, H. E., Trolle, E., Andersen, L. F., Borodulin, K., & Matthiessen, J. (2016). *More Nordic adults with an unhealthy diet: 2011 to 2014: Monitoring of diet, physical activity and overweight in the Nordic countries*. Poster session presented at 11th Nordic Nutrition Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden.

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More Nordic adults with an unhealthy diet: 2011 to 2014

Monitoring of diet, physical activity and overweight in the Nordic countries

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Introduction One of the main ambitions in the Nordic Plan of Action of Better Health and Quality of Life through diet and physical activity is to reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the Nordic countries. A simple low-cost monitoring system has been developed and population data have been collected in 2011 and 2014.

Purpose To examine status and temporal trends in nationally representative samples of adults and children from the Nordic countries.

Methods

- The study population comprised a random sample of 17.755 adults (18-65 y) and 4.949 children (7-12 y) from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Denmark.
- A short Food Frequency Questionnaire covering fruits and vegetables, bread and fish, and indicators of foods rich in saturated fat and added sugar was used to score the diet quality and to estimate the proportion with an unhealthy diet, a medium healthy diet and a healthy diet.
- Data on socio-demographics, physical activity, self reported height and weight were also collected.
- The data were collected by telephone interviews.

Results

- The proportion with an unhealthy diet increased among adults from 2011 to 2014 (from 18.2% to 21.5%), while proportion with an unhealthy diet did not change among children (from 15.4% to 15.6%). In adults and children approximately 10% had a healthy diet in 2014 (Figure 1).
- The overall dietary quality decreased among adults due to an unfavourable development in the intake of fish, wholegrain bread and saturated fat. In children intake of wholegrain bread also decreased.
- A favourable development in the intake of sugar rich foods was seen in adults and children. The development in the intake of fish, fruits and vegetables was also favourable among children.

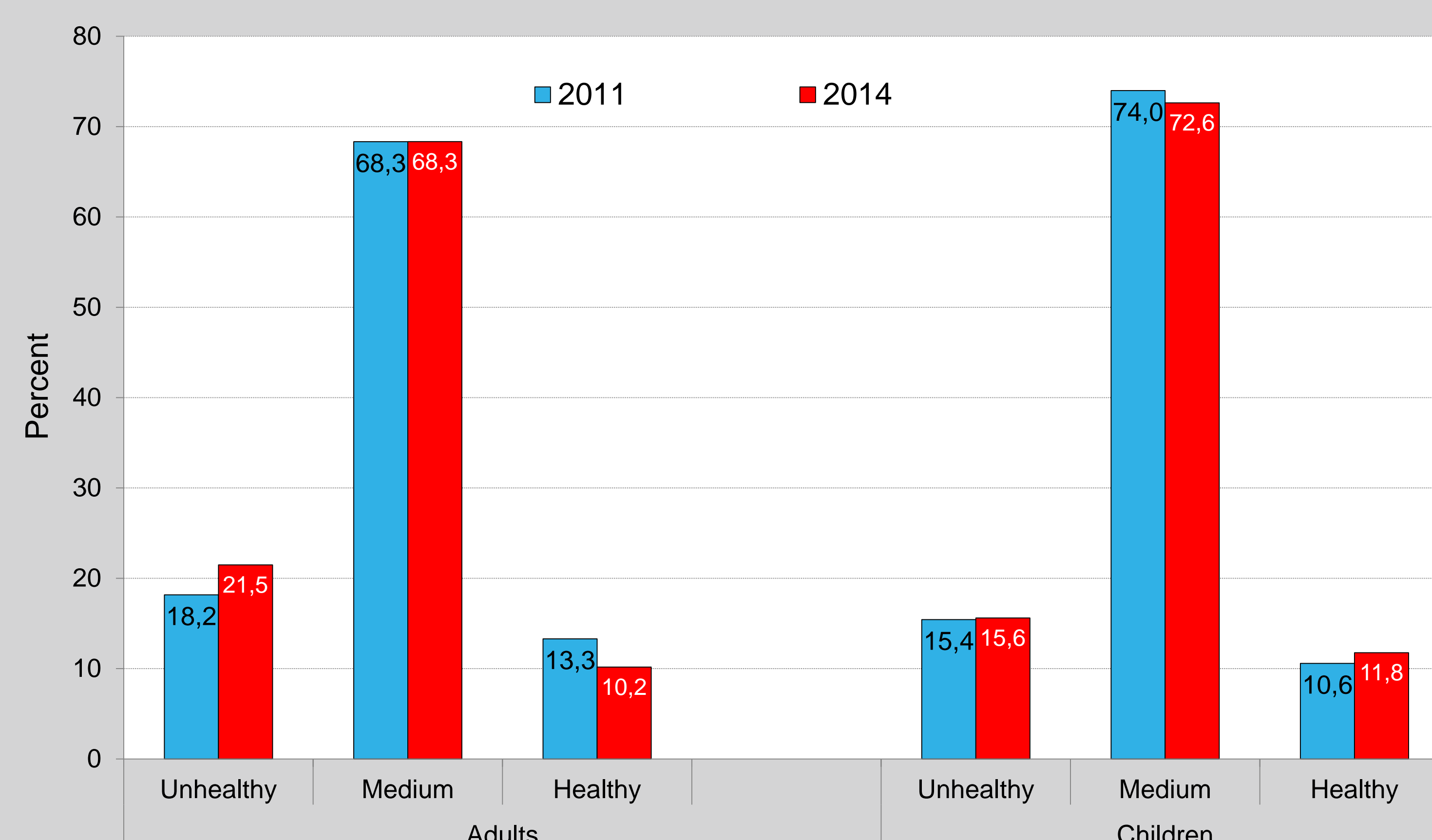


Figure 1. Population levels and the development in the overall dietary quality among adults and children in the Nordic Region 2011 and 2014

Conclusion

The proportion of adults with an unhealthy diet has increased significantly in the Nordic countries. The increase during only a three year period is worrying from a public health perspective because it corresponds to more than 500.000 additional adults (from 3.0 mill. in 2011 to 3.5 mill. in 2014) with an unhealthy diet.

There were no changes in the overall diet quality between 2011 and 2014 among children. Although it is encouraging that we do not see the same unfavourable development in the overall diet quality as for the adults, the high population levels in 2014 are of concern.

Future expectations

- The Nordic monitoring system provides an important tool for stakeholders throughout the Nordic Region.
- The Nordic monitoring system enables the Nordic Region to have highly comparable data within the area of diet, physical activity, overweight and obesity.
- On a national level each country may use further analyses of the data to plan public health initiatives to reduce overweight, obesity and unhealthy lifestyles.
- The questionnaire provides a simple, low cost method to be used, when data on diet, physical activity, overweight and obesity are needed to prioritize public health initiatives on a regional, national and local level.

The Nordic monitoring system is funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Nordic countries are cooperating to develop healthy eating guidelines, as well as to monitor health and food trends in the Nordic Region. Find out more at www.nordicnutrition.org.

